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# Docudramatizing history on TV

*German and British docudrama  
and historical event television in the  
memorial year 2005*

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**ABSTRACT** The 60th anniversary celebration of the end of the Second World War became an important political, social and media event. Memory rituals, speeches and official announcements, celebrations, movies and reports created an ensemble of social activities that re-dramatized the historic event. In these kinds of memorial rituals the re-dramatization of history becomes part of collective memory, in which a shared image of historic incidents is created. Media and especially television play an important role in this making of history. Today, television is one of the most important agents for communicating historical events. At the same time the tendency of historical television documentary is to adopt increasingly popular forms and elements of feature films. This has led to a popular form of historical event television. One of its main genres is the docudrama. The article reviews contemporary docudramas about Nazism and Second World War on German television.

**KEYWORDS** *docudrama, documentary, German television, historical event television, memory, Nazism, Second World War*

**The 60th anniversary** celebration of the end of the Second World War became an important political, social and media event in many of the combatant nations. Memory rituals, speeches and official announcements, celebrations, movies and reports created an ensemble of social activities that re-dramatized the historic event. In this public act of remembrance, history was transformed into a contemporary event that was related to actual political and social incidents, interpretations and discourses. In these kinds of memorial rituals the re-dramatization of history became part of collective memory, in which a shared image of the historic incidents was created. According to Steve Anderson, television plays 'a significant role in cultural memory and the popular negotiation of the past' (2001: 20).

Therefore, it seems important to consider some changes in representation of the history of the Third Reich in film and television.

In Germany especially, these changes provide a new focus on everyday life during the Third Reich which correlates to a new generation of German filmmakers and TV-makers, born after the war. The aesthetics of these film and TV productions imitate the look of history by mixing modes of documentary and fictional representation. These developments in representing German history benefit from a new entertaining mode of event television that is also a dominant mode in historical television worldwide. To describe this mode of representation I would like to borrow a term from the popular German TV historian Guido Knopp (1998), who describes the actual historical television docudrama as 'historical event television'.

Media, especially television, plays an important role in the production of knowledge about the past. Originating in Britain, historical documentaries have been part of German public service broadcasting output since the 1960s. The producers of these documentaries understood themselves as part of the discipline of history, contributing to historical knowledge. As such, the programmes were addressed to experts and mainly discussed themes from the 'official' history of political processes. Archive footage did not serve as a historical source but rather as illustrated texts, demonstrating what Thomas Fischer calls the 'text's hegemony over images' (2004: 516). History on television, then, was not 'an event for a mass-audience but an educational program for a minority' (2004: 517). It is noticeable that this type of 'classical' historical documentary, dominated by the narrator and the spoken, written and documented word, has been replaced largely by more entertaining forms of representing history. Part of this development was the tendency to use oral history by integrating interview sequences during the 1970s. The German documentary filmmaker Hans-Dieter Grabe describes the importance of this:

The TV is predestined to make possible an encounter on a private and therefore intensive level. The narrator comes for a visit through the TV and is sitting right next to the seat or table of the viewer. And therefore the viewer has the opportunity to listen, to get to know the visitor and think about what he is reporting. (Grabe, 1988: 209)

This established a new definition of historical documentary in the 1980s, which sought to communicate the atmosphere of the historical period (Franck, 1988).

The transformation of 'explanatory television' into 'visually narrative television' during the 1990s is often described as the result of concessions to popular taste and has to be seen against the background of the steady erosion of public service broadcasting in most European countries. But the fictionalization of historical narration is not just easy for the viewer to consume. It also has consequences for the perception and understanding



of visualized and narrated history, and therefore for the way in which historical events enter into the collective memory of a society. It is interesting that in Germany, public service broadcasting leads the way in representing historical events in narrative form, when compared to commercial broadcasters. Public service broadcasting in Germany is still viewed as a supplier of reliable coverage. Therefore, it is important that any discussion about the adequacy of German history programming on public television should consider these narrative- and event-oriented terms.

This development is not new, but it seems to have taken on a new quality in recent years. In relation to Anton Kaes' (1989) groundbreaking study *From Hitler to Heimat*, the cultural production of collective memory is no longer affected directly by an intergenerational conflict between formerly Nazi fathers and their sons and daughters alone. A new temporal distance has allowed emotional empathy between grandchildren and grandparents. History is not only personalized, but the new entertaining forms of historical television also absorb elements of the structure by which memories are passed on in society through the generations. New research about the transfer of memories of the fascist past in German families has suggested 'that schools and other agencies of cultural memory form the historical consciousness of young people to a lesser extent than everyday conversation in the family, and last but not least, feature films' (Welzer et al., 2002: 15).

## Historical event television

Today, television is one of the most important agents for communicating historical events. At the same time, the tendency of historical television documentary is to adopt increasingly popular forms and elements of feature films. This has led to a popular form of historical television programme. This kind of historical event television reacts to, and reflects upon, the fact that historical events not only become history. History can become a contemporary event through remembrance also (Fischer, 2004). Therefore, historical event television frames social events such as memorial dates and official remembrance days, and becomes part of contemporary memory culture. On the one hand, it works as an archive of collective memory and, at the same time, takes part in the construction of a national culture of public memory. The broadcasting itself suggests an event-character by producing media debates about new historical facts, technical methods or effects. On the other hand, historical event television becomes a kind of popular history lesson for the audience. It conveys the content of the official culture of memory and connects it to the everyday life of the audience. This means that programming, audience reception and production modes are part of the special character of historical event television.

Relating to its aesthetics, historical event television has a clear tendency to recreate and fictionalize history. Following Hayden White, this kind

of 'para-historical representation' deals with 'historical phenomena, and all of them appear to "fictionalize" to a greater or lesser degree the historical events and characters which serve as their referents in history' (White, 1996: 18). In Germany the modes of historical event television were developed mainly by the editorial department for 'Zeitgeschichte'<sup>1</sup> at the Second German public television station (ZDF). In 1984, Guido Knopp became the founder and head of this editorial department. Since the beginning of the 1990s he has produced documentaries regularly about the history of Nazism, screened during prime-time, all of which have received high ratings.<sup>2</sup> Knopp became a representative for popular and narrative history-telling. His films are much more influential than most academic historical debates in Germany. As early as 1998, Knopp explained the importance of the documentary drama as a mixed genre for the representation of history on television:

I believe that the genre of the docudrama is the future. We know so many stories behind the scenes which are not filmed. If we combine this – viewable for the spectator – with historical footage, a new genre of historical event television will be founded that can give us a new perspective on historical events. (Knopp, 1998)

But the question is, at what point will the distinction between historically authentic and recreated footage no longer be comprehensible for the viewer? What are the functions of the 'authentic' documentary images in this particular context? And what kind of perception of history results from this combination of fictional and documentary modes of representation?

This touches on an important aspect of our mode of receiving historical event television. In his reflections on TV representations of history, Knopp describes the possibilities of electronic media, especially when employing the docudrama genre to produce 'power, curiosity, sympathy, tension and concern' and to 'adopt history sensually' (1988: 1). This includes the 'dimension of spectacle' and a sense of presenting special and exclusive material (1988: 3). The character of historical event television, mixing different modes of representation, is part of this manifesto:

These expensive fictional recreations shouldn't act as a decoy for the favour of the audience, but attractively present historical incidents which are not presentable by documents, gain attention and ease comprehension. (1988: 5)

Aspects of presentation and reception are combined with special aesthetic and narrative forms of representing history on television.

Thanks to international co-productions, the aesthetic and narrative forms of historical event television in different countries are becoming increasingly similar, and American and British programmes are leading the way. But there is something special about German historical television with regard to media representations of remembrance of the Second World War and Nazism. As Steve Anderson emphasizes, we have to



'view cultural relations to the past as overdetermined by the needs of the present' (2001: 20). Indeed, Knopp states that in Germany, the main motivation for making historical television is a 'new need for identity. Identity isn't thinkable without tradition and tradition needs points of orientation for historical awareness' (1988: 1). Bearing this in mind, this article will consider historical event television in Germany by analysing two examples of contemporary docudrama dealing with the history of fascism in Germany, which were screened around the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in May 2005. The first, shown on ZDF, was *Die letzte Schlacht* (*The Last Battle*); the second, a miniseries, aired on the first public German television station, ARD: *Speer und Er* (*Speer and Hitler: The Devil's Architect*). These films fall within a tradition of German television docudrama, but were also a prelude to a huge number of so-called 'event TV' broadcasts of television movies which use the docudrama form to dramatize historical events such as the British bombardments in *Dresden* (2006), or Allied support during the blockade of Berlin in *Luftbrücke* (2005).

To underline the German context of representing this part of German and European history these docudramas will be compared with similar productions from Britain: the documentary series *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* (2005) by Laurence Rees, creative director of BBC History, and the Discovery Channel production *Virtual History: The Secret Plot to Kill Hitler* (David McNab, 2004). This latter 'documentary' presents the Third Reich as 'virtual history' by using computer-generated images of historical people and, interestingly, was shown on German television by a commercial station (RTL2) which specializes in reality television. In this way it could be viewed as a fake, a so-called 'mockumentary' and, in this context, may be seen as an indicator for a future development in historical television.

## History and the mixed docudrama genre

According to Paget's 'Codes and Conventions on Dramadoc and Docudrama', a docudrama retells events from national and international histories, and/or represents the careers of significant national or international figures, or it focuses on "'ordinary citizens" who have been thrust into the news because of some special experience' (Paget, 2004: 196). Paget not only mentions a historic event as a dramatic base for the presented story but also argues that the form of the docudrama itself could be part of its special event character on television. As 'extra-textual events', Paget describes the convention that 'docudrama is often presented and followed by interview and discussion programs' (2004: 205). On the one hand, this special form of programming is part of creating a media event. On the other hand, it underlines the social importance of political or historical topics and discourses which are picked up by the docudrama.

Beside the docudrama's character as media and social event, it is a special form of addressing the audience. Paget describes this docudramatic mode of representation: 'In the dramadoc/docudrama, documentary's promise of privileged access to information is added to drama's promise of understanding through "second order" experience' (2004: 205). The docudrama addresses an 'appeal to belief' to its audience that is 'anchored in a distinctively twentieth-century faith in images – especially moving ones' (Paget, 1998: 87–8).

The combination of documentary and fictional modes of representation corresponds to the audience's desire to see their own received understanding of history confirmed by historical evidence. On the one hand, the representation of history has to live up to the expectation of historical authenticity. The images function as representatives for historical truth and create evidence for the spectator to believe what is seen. They encourage the desire to believe in the truth of the representation. As Bill Nichols (1991: 25) suggests, we can think of a specific 'documentary mode of engagement'. This documentary mode has the function of creating a reality effect for the viewer, which elicits a feeling of authenticity. 'Documentary invokes the desire to know when it identifies its subject and proposes its own variant on the history lesson' (1991: 30).

On the other hand, the fictionalization and dramatization of history meet the spectator's desire to see how historic events took place. But these interpretative representations fulfil also the desire to fit national or personal versions of history to officially remembered history by offering a framework for interpreting and reconstructing historic incidents in the viewer's mind. In so doing, historical docudrama makes a double offer to the audience, as Steven Lipkin describes:

Docudrama argues with the seriousness of documentary to the extent that it draws upon direct, motivated resemblances to its actual materials. As fictions, docudramas offer powerful, attractive persuasive arguments about actual subjects, depicting people, places, actions, and events that exist or have existed. (Lipkin, 2002: 4)

The aesthetic style gives the audience warrants of authenticity: 'The viewer is invited to accept the argument that re-creation warrants, that what we see might have "really" happened in "much this way"' (2002: 5). At the same time, the audience is invited to relive historical incidents from a safe and distant position, as Paget suggests: 'Our gaze as audience is disembodied; we are in the "there-but-not-there" realm of record at the same time as we inhabit the "I-am-there" identificatory realm of the drama' (2004: 207).

In the words of Guido Knopp, this means that the viewer is allowed to identify with the presented historic incident. In the examples of German historical event television this also means that history is presented from the



perspective of key individual actors. For example, the crimes of the Third Reich are discussed only within the context of a few historical figures such as Hitler, Goebbels and others. In Germany this way of writing history has the function of exonerating the 'ordinary' people of that era. Another, and rather contradictory, strategy consists of personalizing history through the presentation of individual accounts. In this way, historical incidents are narrated as fragmented, subjective stories. One consequence of this individualization of history is the clear tendency to level out differences between victims and perpetrators.

### **History as stories from everyday life: *Die letzte Schlacht***

Such kinds of historical docudrama, which recount episodes from the everyday lives of ordinary people, include *Die letzte Schlacht*, screened in March 2005 on ZDF. Guido Knopp was the historical adviser to this production. It was directed by the famous television author and filmmaker Hans-Christoph Blumenberg, who directed *Der Aufstand (The Uprising)* in 2003, a docudrama about the events on 17 June 1953 in Berlin when an uprising by East-German workers was crushed by Soviet tanks; and *Deutschlandspiel*, in 2000, about German reunification. Both were very successful. *Die letzte Schlacht* depicts the last days before Berlin's total defeat and was the first high point in ZDF's programming for the 60th anniversary of the end of Second World War. The broadcast was placed between the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and that of the official end of the war on 8 May. At this time many reports in newspapers and on television dealt with the bombings of German cities 60 years earlier. These reports framed the screening of *Die letzte Schlacht* and warranted public interest, therefore it can be described as a media event as well as part of the memorial year 2005 (Buss, 2005). In addition, the film was promoted as a kind of 'anti-*Untergang*' and benefited from the public interest in the last days of the Third Reich after the release of *Der Untergang (Downfall)*, Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004) (Schneider, 2005).

*Die letzte Schlacht* draws strongly on the conventions of historical event television. Recreated scenes, played by well-known young German actors, documentary footage and testimonies are mixed together. Although it is a docudrama, it is orientated towards the style of the documentaries produced by Knopp and his historical department at the ZDF. This means that the main focus lies on eyewitness testimonies.<sup>3</sup> *Die letzte Schlacht* does not discuss 'great' historic events but the stories of everyday life. Ordinary people become the protagonists of history. The figure of the eyewitness becomes a historical authority. By making ordinary people into the protagonists of a television movie, *Die letzte Schlacht* represents an interesting meeting point between discourses outside and inside the media.



The structure of the docudrama refers to family conversations about the subjective experiences of parents and grandparents during the period of German fascism. The eyewitnesses who represent the grandparents' generation are redramatized by young German actors who also represent the third generation of grandchildren. This structure reflects the stories about Nazism passing down through the generations. The 'grandparents' talk, then the 'grandchildren' interpret their stories to 're-enact' them. Therefore the witnesses – especially the German ones – become characters to identify with, because they act as the audience's own mirror image.<sup>4</sup>

Without any visual and dramaturgical distinction, *Die letzte Schlacht* presents German soldiers, former members of the SS, resistance fighters, nurses, a raped woman and Russian soldiers. All are represented in a similar way as both the witnesses and victims of history. This indiscriminate presentation is underlined visually by the fact that all the interviews are shot in front of the same black background. This discourse is significant for the new German docudrama about the Second World War and Nazism. In this discourse, which is also part of the alteration of historical testimonies through the generations, television plays an important role in filling in the gaps between knowledge and the narrated stories (Welzer et al., 2002).

The recreated scenes illustrate the testimonies. One effect of this narration is that the stories, which are told and presented to the audience, neither have specific historical value nor follow a dramatic structure. They just double the narrated stories. For example, a German woman is interviewed about her experiences when the Soviet army entered Berlin. She talks about soldiers taking away watches and jewels. In the next shot the camera focuses on a watch. Then the woman asks on camera if she should describe what the Soviet soldier looked like. The next shot presents the face of an Asian man. This double structure of word and image is typical of the narration of historical event television. Therefore tension has to be created by using emotional and dramatic music and reinventing additional dramatic parts based on eyewitness stories. To suggest historical authenticity, the recreated scenes are supported by the use of historical documentary images intercut with the interview scenes. Most of this footage originates from newsreels and early documentary films such as the German documentary *Kreuzweg der Freiheit* (*Crossroad of Freedom*) from 1951, produced by the former Nazi propaganda film director Johannes Häussler, which effected a public scandal in the early federal republic and was banned because of its nationalist and revisionist intention (Zimmermann, 2005). This material not only functions to legitimize the fictional scenes, but also acts as an establishing shot to open up the historical context. However, this new arrangement of historical images and the recreation of historical film footage are connected also to actual interpretations of history and forms of national historiography. The result



is a specific form of historical misrepresentation because the recreation is a way of reinventing history.

The everyday life stories told in *Die letzte Schlacht* seem to be *Tatsachenbilder* (factual images) of the historic incidents during the liberation of Berlin. But they are much more *Erinnerungsbilder* (images of remembrance) which correspond to subjective stories and *Geschichtsbilder* (images of history). History becomes a multi-perspective conversation, much as Steve Anderson describes memory as a 'discursive struggle'. But while Anderson describes that 'part of the power and significance of televisual historiography lies in its flexibility and intangibility in comparison with "official" histories' which enable the placing of '[m]emories, which survive among individuals and communities ... in opposition to historical discourse, which is propagated from the top down via cultural and governmental institutions' (2001: 22), in this particular case the concepts of oral history, testimony and documentary images become subordinate to collectively shared images of history, which are part of national memory culture.

### **Reinvention and reorganization: *Speer und Er***

The four-part docudrama *Speer und Er*, which was broadcast on ARD shortly after the 60th anniversary of the end of Second World War on 9, 11 and 12 May 2005, radicalizes methods of docudramatizing history on television. *Speer und Er* tells the story of the Third Reich's main architect and minister of arms, Albert Speer, and his relationship with Adolf Hitler, the *Führer*. This relationship is presented in flashbacks, which are mostly fictionally recreated scenes. The linear narrated plot of the mini-series begins at the beginning of the Nuremberg trials and ends with Speer's release from Spandau Prison in the 1960s. The structure of the story and flashbacks is a docudramatic mixture of documentary images and fictional scenes, which are intercut with interviews with Speer's children.

Director Heinrich Breloer, one of the most significant creators of historical docudramas in Germany, does not use the historic documentary images to illustrate recreated fictional scenes or to produce an effect of authenticity. Instead, he reorganizes the material without any distinction in a flow of montage that combines different levels of time and space and of subjective and objective experience. The historical documentary images, then, lose their function as icons for authentication and their character as an index for specific historic incidents. For example, he dramatizes Speer sitting in his prison cell, 'remembering' his past. The images used in these scenes originate from different sources. The first sequence is a fictional studio reconstruction of Speer sitting in his prison cell in Nuremberg waiting for the trial. The camera moves towards the window. This signals a kind of subjective imagining of Speer's memory. The images following show the aeroplane from the beginning of Leni

Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935), in which Riefenstahl portrayed the 1934 Nazi Party conference in Nuremberg. Together with Speer, the main architect of the conference's buildings, she organized different camera positions and had exclusive access to the *Führer*. The structure of *Triumph des Willens* focused on Hitler and his glorification. Breloer uses these images as a kind of exposition for Speer's memory. The propaganda image becomes a subjective image of remembrance.

In the next sequence we see Hitler and Speer, played by actors, looking out of the aeroplane, then a reverse-shot of Nuremberg taken from *Triumph des Willens*. The next scene shows Hitler on parade in Nuremberg, which again includes images from Riefenstahl's film. But then Breloer shows footage of the razed city of Nuremberg at the end of the war.<sup>6</sup> This change between different levels of time in the flashback shows that these are subjective memory flashes, which break the borders of space and time. The documentary footage at the end of this sequence shows an Allied soldier at the prison in Nuremberg. These shots take the audience back into Speer's prison cell.

Images from Nazi propaganda and postwar documentary footage become part of a subjective visual imagination with no historical evidence. By mixing these different images with recreated scenes they lose every specific historical value; also, the recreated scenes cannot be decoded unambiguously as representative of a historic truth. This montage is a reversal of the distinction between different historical and narrative levels. As Hayden White notes for the postmodernist docudrama and the 'historical metafiction':

Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary – realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated. (White, 1996: 19)

The docudramatic narration of *Speer und Er* follows for the most part Speer's self-image developed in his illegal letters from prison and his autobiography, which were published after his release. One sequence shows Speer in a slave labour camp in Dora where the V2 is produced. But the slave labourers seem to be ghosts who arise at various points in the drama in Speer's mind without really telling the stories of the victims or of Speer's crimes. Even the interviews with Speer's children, which build a kind of commentary on their father's self-image, cannot break this subjective image of remembrance which is created by the powerful mix of recreation and documentary that is much more emotionally touching for the audience.

At the same time, the 'extratextual event' of *Speer und Er* led to debate in newspapers and other media because of its taboo-breaking motivation.



The promotional material called it a destruction of the myth of a leading Nazi who claimed not to know about Nazi crimes. To understand this contradiction, we must look at *Speer und Er* as a media event. The docudrama needed the reputation of breaking a taboo (which was no longer a taboo because the historical facts about Speer's personal participation in Nazi crimes had been known since the beginning of the 1980s) to legitimate its form as a kind of double psychotherapy of the former perpetrator Speer and his de-realization of his own past, and of his children as representatives of the German population and their structures of displacement of guilt (or their feeling of guilt). *Speer und Er* is, then, rather a psychological drama about different German generations and their strategies in handling the past. This also explains the subjective character of the film's images of remembrance. Further, an older audience may see this docudrama as an adaptation of their own experience which does not confront them with their own structures of displacement. Thus it was also possible to see *Speer und Er* as a factual image of the past, while it was really an image of subjective remembrance; an image of fragmented history.<sup>6</sup>

To make both ways of receiving the docudrama possible for the German audience, *Speer und Er* included an extratextual event. Three parts of the series, which were broadcast on three different days at prime-time on ARD, told the life of Albert Speer in the aesthetic and narrative style described above. But on the day that the last part was screened there was a later, second screening of a 'fourth' episode, narrated in a different way. This presented the 'whole truth' about Speer, using more of the classical documentary strategies of representing history. Speer's children, former slave labourers, Speer's publisher and historians, who refer to historical studies, are interviewed about the 'real' Speer and his self-excusing way, which became a model for the whole German population. Here, the re-created scenes are just illustrations for the presented historical facts, or are confronted with the factual knowledge of the 'experts'. The German film critic Christiane Peitz summarized:

Breloer the seducer. Apprehension rises. In three ninety minute long parts the director and his co-author Horst Königstein developed Speer's self-image as the good Nazi and followed every detail of his self presentation. The children and some experts express some doubts about Speer's mask. But only in the fourth part called 'The Deception', which is mostly documentary and was broadcast during the night and not at prime-time, will this mask be taken from Speer's face in an effective way. (Peitz, 2005: 31)

What Peitz calls 'enlightenment as dramatic effect' can be interpreted also as an effect of docudrama. Here, docudrama offers different ways of receiving the history of national socialism by constructing a sensual and subjective historical space which is not bound to facts, but reinvents historic development by reorganizing and recreating images of the past as subjective images of remembrance.

## **Digital animation and reinvention: *Virtual History: The Secret Plot to Kill Hitler***

The British documentary *Virtual History: The Secret Plot to Kill Hitler* covers the events of 20 July 1944, the day that the German officer Graf Claus von Stauffenberg was planning an attempt on Hitler's life. It not only uses recreated scenes, but regenerates historic film footage with the help of digital animation. The special effects (SFX) and visual effects (VFX) industry distinguishes between visible and invisible special or visual effects. While most of the computer generated images (CGI) are invisible effects simulating events that are possible (or could be possible) in the actual world, visible special or visual effects simulate events that are impossible or implausible in the actual world but could appear in alternative worlds (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002). In their analysis of the Steven Spielberg films *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *The Lost World* (1997), Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland assert that the digital effects 'hide behind iconic appearance' (2002: 210) although they are visible. The films try to produce photographic evidence. The mixed aesthetics of visible and invisible special effects produce the appearance of realism and the illusion of a photographic image. Digital images 'replicate the realism and illusionism of the photographic image by conferring photographic credibility upon objects that do not exist in the actual world' (2002: 211). The same happens in this documentary. However, in this case the film offers a clear documentary reading to the audience and, instead of dinosaurs as protagonists, contains historical figures such as Hitler, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt.

Today, many more methods of digitally remastering the past are used where historic film footage is missing. But instead of acknowledging these techniques as recreations, the aesthetics of the dramatized footage are adapted to make it look like amateur film. *Virtual History* recreates 'private' shots of Hitler, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt during this 'day which will change the course of history'. Computer-animated faces of the four leaders taken from documentary footage or photographs were superimposed on actors. Finally, digital filters were applied to give the film the look of old Super 8 footage (Banks-Smith, 2004). The Discovery Channel producers explicitly tried to merge real and fictive images so that the difference was no longer visible (Wolf, 2005: 21). They aimed to convince viewers that they were the spectators of events which, in fact, had never been recorded. As David Abraham, executive vice-president of Discovery UK and producer of *Virtual History*, explains:

When you're watching an actor play a part you have to suspend your disbelief because you know you're looking at an actor. By using this technique you can become emotionally involved because the film looks like original footage. This means what you're seeing is much more shocking because it feels as if you are really there. (Abraham, 2006)



Discovery Communications Inc. is an influential global operation company for factual entertainment that specializes in entertaining historical documentaries and television broadcasting programmes. Patrick Hörl, vice-president and country manager of Discovery Networks in Germany, explicates: 'The concept of personalized history so that the audience can bring it together with their personal history worked out even one hundred percent' (Häussler, 2005: 38). Discovery addresses especially a young and (in Germany) predominantly male audience. Pay-TV stations such as Discovery also function as innovative sources for public television broadcasting: 'Re-enactments and the use of 3D-animation were developed in pay-TV first', explains Hörl (Häussler, 2005: 39). Discovery Germany has a production partnership with ZDF and cooperates with Spiegel TV's history department, which develops historical documentaries for different German commercial private broadcasting companies.

The method of recreating a historical look used in *Virtual History* is also a consequence of the rising influence of amateur film footage on the aesthetics of historical event television. An important element for this new and popular presentation of history on television was to open up new, unused and exclusive film footage.<sup>7</sup> The actual use of such private footage is a consequence of the German law that allows amateur footage to be used without the permission of the 'author' after 50 years (Keilbach, 2004: 566). In her extensive studies of contemporary historical television on fascism and holocaust, Judith Keilbach calls attention to the political effects of this 'new' use of amateur film footage. Further, the shift from black and white to colour pictures evokes a shift from the official level to the private sphere in the Third Reich:

By using private footage the political dimension of Nazism is lost, because the pictures of Hitler sitting in a happy private atmosphere on the balcony of his summer house, or of politicians standing in front of an imposing mountain panorama can't be combined (on television) with the historic fact of national-socialist atrocities. (2004: 566)

*Virtual History* does not use these 'private shots', but regenerates 'missing images' by digital animation. Much more important than the historic incidents, which are shown in the short sequences that are still very expensive to produce, seems to be the technical innovation of digital regeneration.<sup>8</sup> In opposition to this, the structure of *Virtual History* is classical. We can see, clearly separated, 'talking head' historians and experts, who give an orientation around the period. The regenerated scenes take the place of fictional recreation in a docudrama. But besides the event character of these shots, their specific style suggests the authenticity of their content. Through this, the distinction between document and imagination disappears. The content of the sequences is no longer a product of historical speculation but becomes the status of documentary evidence.

## Regeneration and imagination: *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*

Like *Virtual History: The Secret Plot to Kill Hitler*, the documentary series *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*, about the history of the infamous Nazi concentration camp, presents technical and digital effects of recreation and regeneration as its main events. The mini-series mixes nearly all modes of presenting and representing history in historical documentaries and docudrama: historic film footage, photography, interviews and recreated scenes with actors playing Nazis or victims, digital animation and regeneration of the destroyed camp, commentary and quotes from different sources such as documents or diaries.

In contrast with the other examples, the recreated scenes are used strictly as illustrations for the presented facts. For the most part, long shots dominate the recreations and no emotional identification is produced by establishing the main protagonists. There is little dialogue. In most sequences the actors' dialogue overlaps with the commentary or quotations from camp commander Höss's diary.

The portrait of the camp's history is developed from different historical sources. It is orientated towards the studies of the historians Ian Kershaw and Christopher Browning, who took part as historical advisers. Furthermore, the interviews with survivors and former SS officers do not seek to produce identification by emotional effects, but make a strict distinction between perpetrators and victims.<sup>9</sup> The stories that are told are illustrated to allegorize life in the camp, not to produce a special version of history.

As in *Virtual History: The Secret Plot to Kill Hitler*, *Auschwitz* uses new methods of digital generation to represent history. But here only the destroyed buildings of the camps in Auschwitz and Sobibor are visually reconstructed by computer-animated scenes, and ordinary people or historic figures are not represented. In this case the impression of authenticity is caused by the experience of the space. The first-person perspective known from ego-shooter computer games is adopted: through the three-dimensional space the impression of consistency is generated, which is important for the cognitive and emotional immersion of the user into the artificial world of the game (Thon, 2007: 127). The digital images effect



Figure 1 Stills from the BBC series *Auschwitz*. Images reproduced with kind permission of the BBC.



interaction with the audience, which enforces the digital image's impression of reality (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002).

But digital images are not bound to reality. They describe 'non-actual possibilities' (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002: 212). They produce the illusion that the possible world corresponds to the actual world. But in the historical case of Auschwitz it is a past world that really existed. Therefore, in the empty rooms the wandering camera evokes shots from historical documentaries such as Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Bruillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955) or Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). These digital regenerations of the past are deserted locations and could function as allegories for the dehumanization of the victims by their German perpetrators. It is the audience which has to put together the experiences of the victims and the recreated locations of the annihilation in their minds. Digital regeneration does not replace the power of imagination. Together with a factual perspective on the history of the Holocaust, the audience is given room to imagine the unimaginable.

## Conclusion

While German docudramas about Nazism and the Second World War use a combination of documentary and fictional modes of representation to create a special kind of tension and magical aura in order to offer the German audience a sensual and emotional space to empathize with the perpetrators, British docudramas seem to be much more conventional in their distant documentary style and interested in the technical possibilities of visual and digital reconstruction of historical figures, locations and incidents.<sup>10</sup> This corresponds with different ways of remembering the history of Nazism and the Second World War in Germany and Britain. It also points towards different concepts of telling history in popular narratives on television. The much more subjective perspective of German event television and docudrama results in a transgression of the border between documentary and feature film which replaces the historical factual images through images of subjective and national remembrance. These aesthetics correspond with forms of collective and family memory in Germany. As Welzer et al. (2002: 42) show, 'the memory of families does not distinguish as accurately in fiction and reality as science does'. Television and other media 'manifest apparently authentic but in reality highly artificial perspectives on events and become models for the interpretation of how something happened' (2002: 105). In docudramatic event television, therefore, not only the narrative conventions of feature film are used. Historical event television is an audiovisual spectacle in which dramatic music underlines a new, private perspective on history. But most important are the (German) eyewitnesses who function as a mirror image for the German audience and as an object of identification and self-excuse.



The docudrama has become an important representative mode of telling history in television. Mixed modes such as *Die letzte Schlacht* and *Speer und Er* are being displaced increasingly by TV events in which re-enactment, fictional stories and modern computer animation prevail. First, according to the German producer Nico Hoffman of teamWorx, which produced TV events such as *Dresden* and *Luftbrücke*, these films have to deal with historical topics that will get the audience's attention, so they are framed by background documentaries, historical reports, 'making of' features and discussions. Second, they need to have 'cinematic value', which means that they should not be significantly different to a movie shown in a cinema. Third, the casting is important (Butzek, 2005). The aim is to emotionalize history for a mass audience and to find a way into the historic incidents that will facilitate spectators' identification. Therefore, personal stories and situations from the normal course of life are used.

The much more distant perspective of recent British documentaries dealing with the same historical period seems to focus on prominent historic protagonists, who function as a kind of historical background within which to explore new methods of digital animation, such as *Virtual History*. At the same time, the clear distinction between victims and perpetrators, as in *Auschwitz*, enables filmmakers to combine methods of investigation and confrontation with digital and dramatic methods of recreating the past not as a sensual image of remembrance – this can be imagined only by listening to the survivors and victims – but as a regenerated, dehumanized factual image which has to be filled by the imaginative power of the viewer. In contrast, the function of re-dramatization in German docudramas is to produce a definite image of the historic incident. Again, this closed narration corresponds with the passing of history from grandparents to grandchildren: 'What in the narration of the eyewitnesses is perhaps controversial and inconsistent becomes in the versions of the grandchildren clear and definite' (Welzer et al., 2002: 208).

## Notes

1. This German term means contemporary history in the years after the First World War (Knopp, 1988).
2. Such series included *Der verdammte Krieg* (*The Damned War*, 1991), *Entscheidung Stalingrad* (*Showdown Stalingrad*, 1995), *Hitler – eine Bilanz* (*Hitler – An End Result*, 1995), *Hitlers Helfer* (*Hitler's Supporters*, 1997), *Hitlers Helfer II* (*Hitler's Supporters II*, 1998), *Hitlers Krieger* (*Hitler's Warriors*, 1998), *Hitlers Kinder* (*Hitler's Children*, 2000), *Holokaust* (*Holocaust*, 2000; this series was called 'Holokaust' with a 'k' because the producers argued that the Holocaust was a German crime needing a 'German' name), *Hitlers Frauen* (*Hitler's Women*, 2001), *Die grosse Flucht* (*The Big Escape*, 2001), *Die Gefangenen* (*The Prisoners*, 2003) and *Die Befreiung* (*The Liberation*, 2004). For more information about the presentation of the Third Reich in historical documentaries of ZDF, see the work of Judith Keilbach (2002).



3. For *Die letzte Schlacht*, 200 eyewitnesses were interviewed and 130 hours of interviews were recorded (Schneider, 2005).
4. Contemporary historical event television tells a kind of people's history. This tendency is demonstrated by ZDF's campaign to send a so-called 'Century Bus' through Germany to collect life stories and personal memories of history, in order to make them useful in documentaries about German history.
5. Again, Breloer uses these images without indicating the source of the footage.
6. That the docudrama attracted a younger audience to the channel is shown by the ratings. Of the 4.07 million audience who watched the first episode, 1.5 million were 14 to 49 years old, representing 10.7 percent of 14 to 49-year-olds. In April in general, only 8.2 percent of 14 to 49-year-olds watched ARD.
7. One way to develop such 'new' pictures was to reveal new details of well-known historic film footage and use new camera angles or zooms, with the help of digital arrangement, to give a 'new' look to the 'old' material (Keilbach, 2004). Another way is to use colour film footage to create a special television event and spectacle. Most of these colour pictures were already well known but often had been used as black and white copies in order to satisfy our general expectation that the past should appear in black and white.
8. The DVD of the documentary shows a 'making of' the production, which is nearly as long as the historical documentary itself.
9. In contrast to the norm in German historical documentaries, these interviews were shot in front of a private looking (individual) background.
10. That these different modes of representation are also mixed up shows that the new German TV events such as *Dresden* are produced for an international audience. They combine the emphasis on ordinary Germans with a multinational perspective on history and the use of new digital special and visual effects.

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